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Families with no health insurance will be able to get coverage under a government-run plan if three local congressional representatives have their way.

Rep. John Murtha of Johnstown and Sens. Arlen Specter and Bob Casey, all Democrats, each said last week he supports a public plan as part of overall health-care legislation being pushed by President Barack Obama.

Republican Congressman Bill Shuster is adamantly opposed.

Specter's support marks a switch from just a few months ago when the former Republican balked at any government-run plan.

"It will level the playing field," Specter said Thursday during a stop in Dale Borough.

Under a Senate bill being drafted, families could choose between private insurance companies and the so-called public option.

"People will have a choice," Specter said.

"I think people like that. Let's make (the public option) available to them. President Obama likes to say, it tends to keep the insurance companies honest."

Choice is essential, Casey said. As a member of the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee, he has been helping craft the Affordable Health Choices Act.

"I believe people should have a choice and the fundamental choice should be, if you like your health care, we're not going to touch it," Casey said Wednesday during a conference call with reporters.

"We're not going to ask you to do something different or select a different option," he continued. "But, if you don't like the health care you have or the plan you have, you ought to have the option of not just several private options but also a public option which is as close to Medicare as we can get it."

"I think you have to have a public option," Murtha said Thursday following a town hall meeting at the former Brownsville Tri-County Hospital in Fayette County.

Preventive health-care measures and public access are crucial, Murtha said, adding he has urged the administration to look at the military's Tri-Care insurance that allows service personnel and their families to select between Defense Department programs and community resources.

The final legislation probably will look different than anything on the table now, Murtha stressed. Differences will be hammered out in both houses of Congress. Everyone will have to be involved, but remain flexible. One of the mistakes the Clinton administration made in its push for health care, Murtha said, was trying to develop the plan and then push into Congress.

"Everything is on the table," Murtha said. "I told Hillary (Clinton) the last time: You can't do it partisan, you can't do it privately."

Fortunately, Murtha said, it appears the new president is up for the challenge.

"He's flexible," Murtha said. "I think Obama is the most flexible president I've seen."

Murtha said Congress should not rule out a single-payer option, similar to universal health care coverage available in other nations.

But Obama last week downplayed that possibility when he told a town hall meeting he doesn't want to "suddenly upend" a system that provides health care for the most families.

Competition and choice will keep the cost down, by holding insurers accountable, he said, pushing for the public option.

Many Republicans, including Shuster of Hollidaysburg, oppose any government-run "public option" as intrusive and costly.

Last month, Shuster called for more public debate on the plans.

"It is outrageous that Democrats would try to smother debate on a critically important issue as health care reform," Shuster said in a statement.

"What the Democrats are proposing is the creation of a massive government run health care system that will impact everyone's life and the very future of our nation. If there was ever an issue that demanded an open and thoughtful public debate, it's this."

Debate will come in due time, Casey said. The first step is to get a bill written to discuss.

While he said his committee has worked to include both views, he said it won't wait for a consensus.

"We shouldn't be so concerned about bipartisanship in a health care bill," Casey said, adding that the difference can be ironed out on the floors of Congress through the reconciliation process, which allows certain bills to be considered without being subject to filibuster.

Noting Congress and the nation are in a "climate of change," Casey said he expects a bill passed this fall. While he admits he can't predict the final version, he says one thing is sure: It will "change the status quo."

“The idea of staying where we are and pushing this off until another day, another Congress, another time would be a colossal mistake,” Casey said “It would be bad for Pennsylvania to wait, and also the country.”